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SUBJECT: REGIONALISM: STILL A FACTOR IN KOREAN ELECTIONS

REF: A. SEOUL 1756

- 1B. SEOUL 1684
- 1C. SEOUL 270
- 1D. SEOUL 1841
- 1E. SEOUL 1711
- 1F. SEOUL 2048

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Korean voters have traditionally voted in regional blocs for their favored candidate in local and national elections. In the 2002 presidential elections, Roh Moo-hyun received over 90 percent support in the southwest Jeolla Provinces. Despite Roh's campaign pledge to rid politics of regionalism's "evil influence", it will likely be an important, if not the dominant, factor in the December 2007 presidential elections. While all of the leading presidential candidates have eschewed regionalism in public statements, they continue to draw their political base of support from their respective regions. Former President Kim Dae-jung has welcomed a steady flow of progressive candidates (ref A) seeking his approval and subsequent voter support from his traditional base in the southwest. Even Roh has admitted that traditional regional loyalties must be exploited for the progressives to have any chance in December. END SUMMARY.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

12. (SBU) Some historians trace regionalism in Korea to the Three Kingdom period, two thousand years ago, when Goguryeo represented the DPRK, Baekje standing for Honam (Southwest Jeolla Provinces) and Silla for Yeongnam (Southeast Gyeongsang Provinces). Many blame the late president Park Chung-hee for modern-day regionalism in Korea due to his centrally-planned economic measures that heavily favored the Gyeongsan Provinces. Coming from Gumi in North Gyeongsang Province, Park actively turned the voters in his home region of Yeongnam against his dissident archrival, Kim Dae-jung, in the 1971 presidential elections. Demographically, Honam has 5,021,548 people and Yeongnam has 12,701,303 people, representing 10.6 percent and 26.9 percent respectively of the entire population. The actual numbers are more balanced

because there are many more Honam people living away from home than there are from Yeongnam. For the past 30 years, these two regions have strongly supported the "homegrown" candidate with less regard for the candidate's policy goals. This loyalty extends to those voters from the Honam or Yeongnam region living in Seoul or other regions. In addition to uneven economic development, those from the "right" area (Yeongnam) were favored with cabinet positions or other influential posts.

¶3. (SBU) The Park Chung-hee administration concentrated development efforts in the southeast in the 1960s and 70s, with projects such as the construction of the Seoul-Busan highway, the creation of an industrial complex in Ulsan, and the location of POSCO (the world's second largest integrated steel mill) at Pohang. Even the owners of the handful of factories that were built in Honam hailed from Yeongnam. Chaebols, or family-owned conglomerates, hailing from Yeongnam were also favored with more generous tax, foreign exchange and licensing benefits. As a result, the population in Jeolla Provinces experienced a chronic decrease in the 1970s, while that of Gyeongsang province rose sharply. On the personnel front, Cabinet Ministers and Vice Ministers since the Chun Doo-hwan administration who hail from Yeongnam accounted for 37 percent, while those from Honam accounted for only 19 percent. Particularly during the Chun Doo-hwan, Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-sam administrations, the percentages of Youngnam ministers were 43 percent, 41 percent and 40.7 percent, respectively. This era of regional favoritism led many to brand the practice of regional favoritism as "evil" and a "curse."

¶4. (SBU) Several of the key players in the regionalism debate surrounding the upcoming presidential election were at the center of the same debate during the spring 2004 parliamentary elections. GNP candidate Park Geun-hye was selected as the party chair in March 2004, and she immediately commenced a campaign effort in Daegu and the Gyeongsang Provinces (Park's home region) in preparation for the April parliamentary elections. Then Uri Chairman Chung Dong-young said, "Park should not stir up regionalism and use it in her favor. I hope the April 15 elections will be a turning point of the country's election history by breaking regionalism." Kim Han-gill, leader of a group of Uri defectors who became the Moderate Unified Democrats (ref B), was also heavily involved in the election as Uri's top campaign strategist.

¶5. (SBU) The April 2004 elections did not live up to the expectations, as representatives were chosen closely along regional lines. Angered by the opposition's attempts to impeach Roh in April 2004 just before the National Assembly elections, Uri voters responded strongly in the southwest and around Seoul, while the GNP received solid support only in the southeast. Given the limited time that Park had to rally her party, she relied heavily on support from her traditional regional base while the ruling party used anger at the opposition camp and their own regional ties to garner support.

EAST-WEST DIVIDE

¶6. (SBU) Undoubtedly, regionalism persists, although an argument can be made that it is less severe now than in the recent past. For example, the 2002 presidential elections were also marked by a generational divide. Younger voters turned out in force to support Roh Moo-hyun while older voters tended to support his rival, Lee Hoi-chang. The two major political parties today - the GNP and Uri - are at the opposing ends of the political spectrum, accurately labeled conservative and liberal. The population density in Seoul also continues to increase with no sign of a downturn; further taking voters out of politically charged regions and into the more neutral voting arena of metropolitan Seoul.

¶7. (SBU) Still, a significant number of voters from Honam

and Yeongnam tend to continue voting along regional lines, even after moving to Seoul. A poll right after the April 2004 general election shows that, although just 27 percent of voters nationwide voted for parties from the same region as they hail from, the figure sharply rose for those from Honam (53.6 percent) and Yeongnam (45.3 percent) regions. The older the voters, the more they tended to vote based on regional loyalty. Voters in their 40s, 50s, and over were more likely than those in their 20s and 30s to vote according to regional ties.

¶8. (SBU) Experts suggest that it is the middle of the country where you can find the most balanced community of voters. A recent news article in the conservative Donga Ilbo newspaper suggested that Korea is looking for a voting district that could act like New Hampshire and be a barometer for how the rest of the nation is likely to vote. The experts suggested that Goesan County in North Choongchung province has the best track record of voting for presidential candidates who were ultimately successful in being elected. The article further suggested that there are also several locations in the Seoul Metropolitan area that have successfully predicted election outcomes.

CENTER-LEFT PERSPECTIVE

¶9. (SBU) Uri Party defectors have attempted to use regionalism to their advantage since the mass defections began in late January. Many hoped the Jeolla native and former PM Goh Kun could gain broad national support in addition to strong support in the southwest, but Goh dropped out of the presidential race in January. Next, progressives hoped former Seoul National University President Chung Un-chan could lead the creation of a Jeolla-Choongchung regional party, but this also failed to materialize. Most pundits note that Chung was not attractive as a candidate, but had simply had the right regional background, which ultimately proved insufficient to make a run at the presidency. Later, they attempted to broker a deal with the Choongchung-based People First Party (PFP), but it is unclear if the PFP will join the progressives or the conservatives.

¶10. (SBU) On June 4, the Democratic Party (DP) concluded negotiations with Uri defectors led by Rep. Kim Han-gill to join forces as the third-largest voting bloc in the National Assembly with 34 members (ref B). The DP remains synonymous with former President Kim Dae-jung and his strong support base in the Jeolla Provinces. Given this large and important group of voters, several individuals and groups within the progressive camp were actively courting the DP. The new combined party, called the Moderate United Democrats (MUD), claims to be anti-Roh and anti-GNP (ref D). President Roh spoke out against the formation of a regional-based coalition, saying such a coalition meant a return to old-fashioned regionalism-based politics. Roh continues to criticize any regional-based coalition, but in May publicly stated that if a broad, progressive coalition had to be formed, he would not stand in its way.

GNP PERSPECTIVE

¶11. (SBU) Former Seoul Mayor and presidential front-runner Lee Myung-bak asserts that the era of a politician winning 90 plus percent in a given district are gone. In ref E, Lee told the Ambassador that he only needed to receive 20 percent of the votes in the Jeolla region in order to assure victory (he claims he currently has between 25 and 30 percent support there). This is probably wishful thinking because most of Lee's support in the Jeolla region will vanish as soon as a unified liberal candidate emerges.

¶12. (SBU) Former GNP Chairperson Park Geun-hye, who is steadily making up ground with Lee in the polls (ref F) will

continue to rely on her strong support base in the southeastern region as she has in the past. She is even less likely than Lee to pick up additional votes in the Jeolla region given her perceived weaker economic platform and because of the lingering resentment in the region toward former president/dictator Park Chung-hee (1961-1979), her father.

KIM DAE-JUNG'S INFLUENCE

¶13. (SBU) In the span of one week in May, former president Kim Dae-Jung met separately with three of the leading center-left candidates: Sohn Hak-kyu, Chung Dong-young and Kim Han gill. While the former president is said to be working to unify the various candidates, the candidates themselves sought Kim's endorsement and subsequent voter support from the Jeolla provinces where Kim maintains a loyal following. In response to Kim's meetings and related public statements, GNP Chairman Kang Jae-sup said, "It does not make sense that a person who has claimed to be a victim of regionalism is now actively promoting it." Kim has said publicly that he advises the liberals to present a unified candidate who can compete strongly against the winner of the GNP primary.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) Like the elephant in the living room, regionalism is an obvious truth that South Korean politicians like to pretend to ignore. Most Koreans are ashamed that there should be such a divide between the east and west. True, a good argument can be made that regionalism is becoming less pervasive as voters become more concerned with policy issues rather than regional issues and as the population continues to migrate away from the outlying provinces and into Seoul. But all evidence shows that the divide is still very wide. A particularly daunting statistic is that in the 2002 presidential election, Roh Moo-hyun, who does not come from the Jeolla region, won 93 percent of Jeolla votes, just 1 percent less than Kim Dae-jung won in 1997. All this support was because Roh was the non-GNP (or non-Yeongnam) candidate.

VERSHBOW